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ABSTRACT

This digest uses a question-and-answer format to summarize basic information about the use of English-based sign systems with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. English-based sign systems are explained as using the vocabulary of American Sign Language (ASL) with the grammatical and syntactical features of English. These systems include Signed English, Seeing Essential English, and Signing Exact English. The paper notes wide use by hearing parents and educators who wish to expose the child to English but negative attitudes by many Deaf adults who view such systems as a denial of Deaf culture. Benefits of this option are also identified, including increased access to English during the language learning years. Among limitations noted are the danger of signing only parts of a spoken message, resulting in incomplete English that fits neither English or ASL syntax. Parents are offered a list of questions to consider before choosing this communication option. (DB)

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What is meant by English-Based Sign Systems?

Sign language as used by deaf adults may resemble English, or it may be American Sign Language (ASL), which has a grammar, syntax, and idioms distinct from English. ASL is sometimes called a natural language because it evolved through use by people who were deaf. In contrast, English-based sign systems were developed by educators. These systems adopted much of the vocabulary of ASL but added grammatical features of English such as articles (a, an, the), verb endings (-s, -ing, -ed, -en), and other markers of English. English-based sign systems follow English syntax. In some systems English words are presented literally (e.g., one sign is used for the word "run" no matter what the meaning). In other systems the signs for English words may vary depending on the meaning of the word, to more closely relate to ASL.

One such system that remains close to ASL is Signed English (Bornstein, Hamilton, & Saulnier, 1983). This system is aimed at preschool and lower elementary children and includes a limited number of markers (e.g., -s, -ed, -ly). It retains many conceptual signs from ASL, such as "hair-yellow" for "blond". A number of children's storybooks such as *Little Red Riding Hood* are available in this system. A system no longer widely used that was extremely close to English is Seeing Essential English (Anthony, 1971), often referred to as SEE 1. This system used separate signs for English morphemes and signed by "root words" such as *gene* as the root for *genetic, general, generous*. The most widely used system that is close to English is Signing Exact English, or SEE 2. This system includes many more markers than Signed English (e.g., -ous, -ness, -ment) and signs by English word rather than by concept. In SEE 2 one would use the same signs for "is running" whether the subject is a man, the water, one's nose, or a car. In ASL the sign for "run" would differ in each of those situations.

Apart from specific vocabulary, all of the sign systems include the visual features of a signed language that add meaning and intonation to signing, such as shaking the head with a negative statement, raising the eyebrows with a yes-no question, placing signs according to meaning, and using facial expression and body movement to convey mood and tone.

Many individuals and programs use a mixture of systems. Because one can speak nearly twice as fast as one can sign, it takes commitment and practice to sign complete English. Many individuals sign in English word order but do not include word endings or markers. Some choose to sign by word meaning; others choose to follow the SEE 2 principle of signing by English word.

Who can use this option?

English-based systems are used by many parents of young children who are deaf. They are also used widely by educators. Some of the vocabulary developed by these sign systems has been accepted in widespread use in ASL, but many Deaf adults have negative attitudes toward the use of such a system. They view it as a denial of Deaf culture and a failure to accept a child's deafness. Parents and educators, on the other hand, use it because they wish to expose the child to English in a clearly visible modality. In addition, many parents prefer it because English is their own language, and they wish their children to know the same language. A number of families and schools use such a system as one component of a total approach to communication, including ASL, amplification, speechreading, reading, and writing. Persons who work with families of young children, or with the children themselves, should be familiar with the system used in their locality.

What are the benefits of this option?

Children learn the language of their environment when they perceive it clearly. Use of an English-based sign system provides them with access to English during the language learning years. Such a sign system is also useful with older students who have not yet mastered English, when used with a second language learning approach. As with any language, the fluency of the child will depend on the fluency of the language models in his/her environment. When fluent and complete models are consistently available, English can be learned in a normal manner. This is a critical point for English-based sign systems, since English literacy has been and remains very important and very difficult for many individuals who are deaf.

What are the limitations of this option?

Because English-based sign systems do differ from ASL in grammar and in the use of English markers, some Deaf adults do not like them. They feel it is an attempt by hearing persons to impose hearing standards on children who are deaf. In addition, because speech is faster than signs, an individual must be committed to presenting complete English in signs and to make the effort to learn and become fluent. Persons who are not wholly committed may end up signing only part of their spoken message, presenting incomplete English that does not fit ASL syntax either.

What are some questions to ask before choosing this option?

Do I believe in the importance of presenting complete English? Am I willing to take the time to become fluent? What is used in the schools in the area where I live? What materials are available to help me learn? How will I react if I meet negative attitudes from

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deaf adults? How will I ensure the child's involvement with the Deaf community and his/her self-esteem as a person who is deaf?

References and Additional Resources

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The Gallaudet University Bookstore (800 Florida Ave., NE, Washington DC 20002) carries both Signed English and Signing Exact English materials. Gallaudet University Press publishes the Signed English materials, and has published a book, *Manual communication: Implications for education* (1990), edited by H. Bornstein, which provides detailed information on the topic. Specific questions about Signing Exact English may be referred to the SEE Center for the Advancement of Deaf Children (10443 Los Alamitos Blvd., Los Alamitos, CA 90720). SEE 2 materials are published by Modern Sign Press, Inc., PO Box 1181, Los Alamitos, CA 90720.

Dr. Gustason, who originated the SEE 2 system, is director of the SEE Center for the Advancement of Deaf Children. She is fluent in oral English, SEE 2, and ASL.

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